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BRIEF REPORT

Means or Outcomes?

Goal Orientation Predicts Process and Outcome Focus

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that the representation of goals primarily in terms of means (process focus) compared to outcomes of goal pursuit (outcome focus) increases across the lifespan. Nothing is known, however, about the processes underlying this age-related difference. The current study investigates age-related differences in growth and maintenance orientation as one of the factors contributing to age-related differences in goal focus. A self-report study ($N = 123$, 18 to 82 years, $M = 48.59$) presents first evidence that process focus is predicted by maintenance goal orientation, whereas outcome focus is predicted by growth orientation. Moreover, maintenance goal orientation mediates the positive association of age and process focus. Results are discussed taking a functional perspective of the role of goal orientation in age-related differences in goal focus.

Keywords: Goal orientation, motivation, goal focus

(2117 words)

Means or Outcomes?

Goal Orientation Predicts Process and Outcome Focus

Goals can be defined as a cognitive representation linking certain means (or actions) with desired outcomes. People differ in how much they focus on the means (process focus) or on the outcomes (outcome focus) (Freund, Hennecke, & Mustafić, in press; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1997). For instance, when pursuing the goal to exercise regularly, people can focus primarily on the means (e.g., going jogging every morning) or on the outcome (e.g., losing weight). Which goal focus people adopt appears to have important consequences for goal achievement and subjective well-being (for an overview see Freund et al., in press). For instance, in a longitudinal study on the goal to start regular physical exercise, process focus was related to higher goal satisfaction and goal adherence over time (Freund, Hennecke, & Riediger, 2011). Importantly, process and outcome focus differ by age. Previous research has shown that process focus increases across the lifespan: Freund et al. (2011) found in three studies that younger adults focus more on the outcomes of goal pursuit than older adults, and that a process focus becomes more dominant in older adults.

One of the open questions in this research concerns the processes underlying the shift in focusing in either means or outcomes of goal pursuit across adulthood. The current research focuses on goal orientation as one of the possible processes. More specifically, the present study investigates whether goal orientation towards growth and maintenance mediates the representation of goals primarily in terms of their means (process focus) or their outcomes (outcome focus).

Across the life span, the ratio of gains to losses in resources becomes increasingly negative (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). There is high social consensus about this shift (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1986), which is also reflected in an increase in the orientation of personal goals towards maintenance and the avoidance of losses across

adulthood (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006). In this paper, we argue that age-related differences in goal orientation towards gains and (the avoidance of) losses or maintenance is one of the factors contributing to age-related differences in goal focus on the process or outcome of goal pursuit.

As elaborated by Freund et al. (in press), goals oriented towards maintenance, have no clear end point and, therefore, might render themselves to focusing on the means rather than the outcome of goal pursuit. Wanting to maintain a certain state (e.g., one's level of cognitive or physical functioning) requires working continuously on the goal because, once stopped, the feared change - most likely a decline or loss in functioning - might take place. Hence, maintenance goals may be more likely to be associated with focusing on the means of the continued goal pursuit rather than on the outcome. Moreover, maintenance goals are temporally and psychologically very close (i.e., the desired state is already achieved and needs to be continued into the future), which, according to construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), should be associated with a more concrete representation of the means ("do" goals, according to Carver & Scheier, 1998).

In contrast, goals oriented towards change, i.e., growth goals, typically specify the achievement of new outcomes (e.g., to get a paper published) that might draw attention to the outcome. Further, growth goals specifying a desired outcome in the future are more distant and, according to construal level theory, likely to be represented in an abstract way and in terms of ends.

Taken together, we expect that differences in goal orientation towards growth vs. maintenance mediate the relationship between age and focus on the process or the outcome of goal pursuit.

Methods

Procedure

Participants were recruited through an advertisement in a local newspaper. They were invited to the Life-Management laboratory at the University of Zurich to fill out a self-report questionnaire. The sessions took place in groups of up to 20 participants. After providing informed consent, participants filled out a short demographic questionnaire and several questionnaires related to their personal goals as well as various other constructs that are not related to the current paper. The sessions lasted about one hour. At the end of the session, participants were fully debriefed and reimbursed with 20 CHF (15 USD).

Sample

The sample was comprised of $n = 153$ adults (18 to 82 years, $M = 51.01$, $SD = 17.45$; 67% female). Regarding education, 39 % of the participants had completed obligatory or high school, 11% had completed an apprenticeship, crafts master school was completed by 20%, university of applied sciences degree by 11%, and 19% had an university degree.

Goal variables

Goals. First, participants were introduced to the term “personal goals” as states individuals want to achieve, avoid, or maintain. They were then asked to list three personal goals in each of the life-domains of social relations, continued education, health, hobbies/leisure.

Growth and maintenance orientation. Following a similar procedure used by Ebner et al., (2006), participants rated each of their personal goals regarding the degree to which they aimed at achieving gains (growth goal orientation) or maintaining a current status quo (maintenance goal orientation) on a scale ranging from 0 “not at all” to 6 “very much.” We calculated the mean score across the three goals as an indicator of general growth and maintenance goal orientation ($M_{\text{Growth}} = 4.83$; $SD = .99$; $M_{\text{Maintenance}} = 4.47$; $SD = 1.28$).

Process and outcome focus. Process and outcome focus were assessed on a scale ranging from 0 “not at all” to 6 “very much” for each goal (“How much priority has the *pursuit* of this goal to you?” for process focus; “How much priority has the *attainment* of this goal for you?” for outcome focus). We calculated the mean of the three process and outcome items, respectively, across the three goals as an indicator of process and outcome focus ($M_{Process} = 4.30$; $SD = 1.04$; $M_{Outcome} = 4.31$; $SD = 1.07$).

Results

Using multiple regression analyses and mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes & Preacher, 2011), we regressed process and outcome focus on age and goal orientation. As controlling for educational status and gender did not change the results, we report the effects without these control variables.

Replicating previous research, age was positively associated with maintenance orientation ($\beta = .31$, $t(151) = 4.08$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .31^{**}$). However, contrary to our expectations, age was not related to growth orientation ($\beta_{growth} = .05$, $t(151) = .62$, $p = .53$). Regarding goal focus, age was significantly related to process focus ($\beta = .20$, $t(150) = 2.49$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .04^*$), but not significantly to outcome focus ($\beta_{outcome\ focus} = .14$, $t(151) = 1.72$, $p = .08$, $R^2 = .02$).

Confirming our assumptions, maintenance goal orientation predicted goal focus significantly ($\beta = .44$, $t(150) = 6.01$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .19^{**}$), indicating that individuals who pursue maintenance goals are more likely to report that they focus on the means when pursuing their personal goals. Testing the hypothesized mediation, including maintenance orientation in the relationship between age and process focus decreased the association of age and process focus ($\beta = .07$, $t(150) = .89$, $p = .37$, $R^2 = .19^{**}$). A bootstrap analysis with $m = 1000$ samples revealed a significant indirect effect, $CI_{95-} = 0.0034$, $CI_{95+} = 0.014$, indicating that maintenance orientation mediates the association between age and process focus.

Again confirming our hypothesis, growth orientation was significantly associated with a focus on outcomes ($\beta = .57$, $t(151) = 8.49$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .32^{**}$). As outcome focus was not significantly associated with age, no mediational analyses were conducted. Figure 1 illustrates the associations between age, goal orientation and goal focus.

Discussion

The current study provides first evidence that age-related differences in focusing on the means of goal-pursuit is mediated by a maintenance orientation. Moreover, as predicted, growth orientation was associated with focusing on the outcome of goal pursuit. Contrary to expectations, however, outcome focus was unrelated to age in the current study.

According to the current study, growth goals focus attention on the outcome, whereas maintenance goals focus attention on the process of goal pursuit. These results are support construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), suggesting that goals that imply a closer distance from the actual to the desired state (i.e., maintenance goals) are represented very concretely in terms of the means of goal pursuit. In contrast, goals that involve a larger distance (i.e., growth goals) are represented in a more abstract way in terms of the outcomes of goal pursuit.

Taking a functional perspective, higher adoption of maintenance goals that focuses attention on means might in older adults might be adaptive. Resource losses in older adulthood might lead to the perception that “achieving new outcomes (growth) is less likely and desirable than focusing on the task at hand, namely, the process of goal pursuit.” (Freund et al, in press, p. 18). By focusing on the means of maintenance goals, older adults might derive more satisfaction out of the pursuit of long-term goals rather than focusing on the negative discrepancy of the actual and the desired state, as would be the case for a growth goal and an outcome focus. Future research needs to investigate the role of the availability of resources for the adoption and function of goal orientation and goal focus.

One of the limitations of the current study is that it relies on self-report data. Building on the current results, future studies could experimentally induce growth vs. maintenance orientation and measure subsequent goal focus and its adaptiveness for goal achievement and subjective well-being. This would also address another short-coming of this first study on the relation between goal focus and goal orientation, namely that, due to the correlational nature of the design, results cannot be interpreted as implying a specific causal direction. From an associative-network perspective (e.g., Bower, 1981), the activation of a specific goal focus might evoke a specific goal orientation just as goal orientation might lead to the activation of a specific goal focus. Finally, as is always true for cross-sectional studies spanning the adult life span, age and cohort effects are confounded (Baltes, 1968). Unfortunately, as much as longitudinal or cohort-sequential designs are desirable, they would take up many years to capture the age-range that was included in this study.

To conclude: The current study aimed at addressing the question of the factors underlying age-related differences in goal focus. Bridging the gap between two goal constructs, goal orientation towards growth or maintenance and goal focus on the means or the outcome (Freund et al., in press), results confirm theoretical assumptions that process focus is related to maintenance orientation, whereas outcome focus is associated with growth orientation. Moreover, older adults' stronger focus on the means of goal pursuit might be due to their adoption of maintenance goals. This might be functional when age-related losses in resources increase the importance of maintaining functioning and focusing on the respective means rather than keeping an eye on the unlikely outcome of growth goals.

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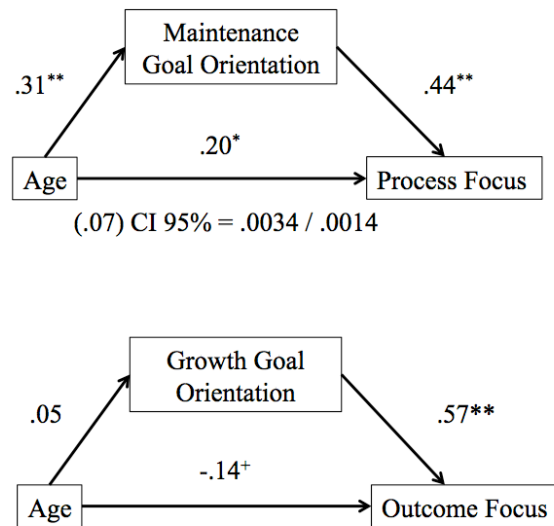


Figure 1. Mediation of the association between age and process focus through maintenance orientation (standardized regression coefficients).